drift

Priya Ann Wittman

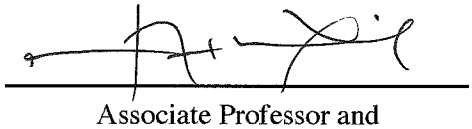
Submitted to the faculty of the Herron School of Art and Design
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art
in the Herron School of Art and Design
Indiana University

May 2016

drift

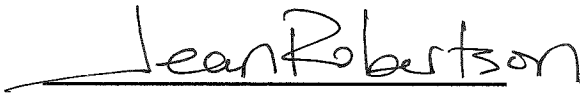
By
Priya Ann Wittman
Master of Fine Arts

Herron School of Art and Design
IUPUI
Indiana University



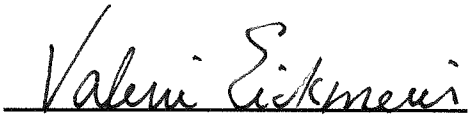
Associate Professor and
Director of Fine Arts Graduate Programs Andrew Winship
Advisor

Associate Professor Danielle Riede
Committee Member



Chancellor's Professor Dr. Jean Robertson
Committee Member

Accepted: May 2016



Professor Valerie Eickmeier
Dean of Herron School of Art and Design

7/13/16
Date

introduction

Great significance is a matter of perspective. From an intimate viewpoint, significance is large and ubiquitous: the curled up corner of a piece of paper, the pleasure enjoyed in a shared meal, the spot on an ankle that starts to itch. From a remote perspective, significance dissolves into potential nothingness; masses of accreted particles, barely visible giants form relationships with each other across vast distances. My work explores the nuances and complexities of this question: Is the earth and the entirety of human history as insignificant as a grain of sand, or is a grain of sand as monumental and complex as the universe in which it exists?

It is not my artistic goal to discover an answer. I accept the impossibility of that. Instead my goal is to dissect, reveal, and understand the emotional and psychological responses to this question. In doing this, I fixate on the proverbial grain of sand, and then my attention disperses to see its infinite context. I give importance to accumulations of particles, and then place them in precarious environments. This process both requires and causes a perpetual shifting of perspective on my part, particularly between the meaningful and the meaningless. My artwork is an ever-changing embodiment of this process. Through making, observing and responding to my art I maintain a constant cycle of question development and exploration of the infinite answers to these questions. The most important questions concern human existence: Where does a person begin, and where do they end? When do I occur, and when do I stop occurring? What makes existence meaningful or meaningless? The processes of making, observing, and thinking about art provide me with a flexible framework in which I can conduct investigations into these questions.

drift

drift is the title of a single installation work comprised of numerous components that I composed and presented for my thesis exhibition. Each individual component has a life of its own that may diverge at some point from its relationships with the other components of *drift*. When the installation is presented again in another space, it will become a variation of itself, similar to how a person might change in response to living in a new place, or traveling through an unusual landscape. Like us, *drift* is the same, but also different as it moves from one space to another.

drift, pins, glitter paper, ribbon, tulle, grid paper, ballpoint pen, birch dowels, zip ties, cushion foam, organza, bamboo skewers, quilting pins, notebook paper, acrylic medium, toothpicks, milk paint, graphite, ink pen, pipe cleaners, sword picks, iridescent mylar, copper wire, acrylic paint, thread, conte crayon, drawing paper, inkjet print, confetti, balsa wood, yarn, gesso, casein paint, parasol picks, gravel, plastic cup, felt, construction paper, plywood, gouache, watercolor paper

The word "drift" has multiple definitions, each of which describes my current work from a different angle. The most relevant examples include:[1]

1. be carried slowly by a current of air or water
2. a continuous slow movement from one place to another
3. the general intention of meaning of an argument or someone's remarks
4. a large mass of snow, leaves, or other material piled up or carried along by the wind
5. glacial and fluvioglacial deposits left by retreating ice sheets
6. a large mass of flowering plants growing together

These definitions are embodied and enacted by the installation as a whole, by each individual component in relation to one another, by me as I compose and arrange the work, and by viewers of the work as they move in and around the installation, engaging with the elements that shift in and out of their point of view. The installation as a whole has the appearance of a landscape that is drifting in or out of the space. This landscape is a macrocosm that supports a multitude of microcosms. The relationships between the colors, textures, and compositions of the microcosms affect the larger composition of the installation. In this way, *drift* illustrates the interconnected qualities between the microscopic, and the monumental.

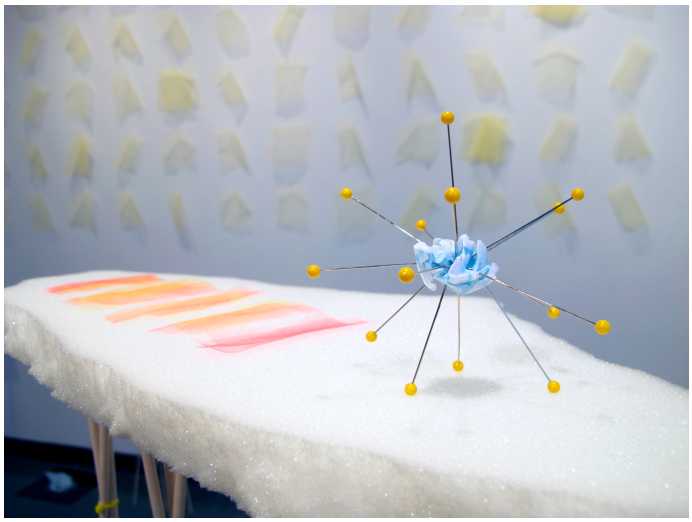
The overarching theme of *drift* is one of simultaneous dispersion and accumulation. This theme is immediately apparent in the mass of yellow tulle squares floating diagrammatically on the largest wall of the gallery space. They are suspended in between states of disparate individuals and accumulated whole. The manufacturer's name for the color of the fabric is "sunshine," a fact I discovered with satisfaction after I chose the color for its projection of warmth

[1] "drift definition," *Google*, Accessed May 3, 2016,

and light. The squares of mesh and their cast shadows move in response to the slightest change in the surrounding air, expressing the invisible activity that perpetually inhabits the stillest of places.

drift is particularly rife with representations of varying states of water and light. The mesh squares and their shadows epitomize the process of light interacting with water to induce a transformation from liquid to vapor. Wedges of upholstery foam break and dissolve apart as they drift from the gallery walls, expressing a fragmented surface of ice or snow that is carried by an invisible horizontal current. Various forms of clouds with pin legs roam the surfaces of the landscape, carrying on with the ebbs and flows of their lives while inhabiting and affecting the larger system.

While experiences with water and its varying physical states are universal, I realized at some point during the installation process that *drift* is also a manifestation of my thoughts and memories surrounding my own experience of briefly living in Alaska. References to the yearlong sojourn are evident to me, particularly in my color selections, material choices, and sculptural forms. The color and texture of the upholstery foam, combined with the action of tearing induces the material to convey the simultaneous lightness and density of expanses of snow. The fluorescent colors and copper wire in my work are symbols of life and energy, but also speak to the particular qualities of the winter light in Alaska. As the days became shorter in length, daylight became projections of orange, pink, and copper that reflected off of the snow as the sun scraped across the edge of the horizon. These glowing colors were often complemented by variations of blue. Occasionally the light seemed even brighter at night than during the day, especially if the moon was full and the northern lights were active. My current affinities for fluorescence, iridescence, and variations of primary color combinations can clearly be traced back to this time in my life.



Over the year, I observed and contemplated the radical change that the physical environment underwent each season. At the same time, the change in the landscape was paralleled by a profound series of transformations in my personal life. My memories of the visual and environmental changes are intertwined with my memories of these personal events. Therefore in *drift*, I also investigate the connections between the changes in the environment, and

the changes in human relationships. The references to the transformative processes of water and light are thus reflected in the movement and arrangement of a multitude of figures in the installation. Reflecting the interplay between light and water, these figures interact, accumulate, disperse, and transform as they travel within the landscape of the installation.

flexible systems

Flexibility is essential to creating circumstances that allow for profound discovery. There are many types of flexibility. Plastic forms, malleable material, changes of heart, and a willingness to reevaluate are all examples of flexibility. Flexibility does not indicate a lack of structure, but refers to the potential for change within a structure. For example, genetic code is a structure that transforms and morphs into endless permutations of form. When attempting to describe cosmological structures to the public, scientists often refer to the universe as a fabric, or ocean—matter that is fluid, perpetually in motion. All matter, space, and life are composed of flexible systems that breathe, expanding and contracting in response to one another.

I place a high priority on the quality of flexibility in my studio practice. I have developed a system of structures and rules that allow for discovery and change. These rules provide organization and limitations, without which there would be no growth, only chaotic entropy. This system is akin to an evolving ecosystem. I am also a component of this system—we both change and transform in response to one another's developments. In this way, my work is a mirror for my self, catching and reflecting my cycles of thoughts that surround the questions in my mind.

My work reflects both my mental thought processes and my physical self. For example, one of the rules I developed for my ecosystem is that I only choose materials that can be manipulated by my body and/or with a few simple tools. This rule began as a guideline, but has

since become axiomatic in nature. It provides fundamental structure to my practice that is essential to its growth. Due to this rule, everything that comes into my studio can be carried, transported, altered, and arranged by me alone. In this way, my installations are a reflection of my physical form, individual capabilities, and personal desires.

The ability to cultivate my own system of art making was realized over the course of several years. The realization can be in part attributed to the accumulation of exposure to many different artists over the years. In the Art21 episode *Play*, Jessica Stockholder describes the need for parameters in her own work. I remember feeling a sense of liberation when listening to her describe a particular studio rule: she must be able to carry all of her materials up the stairs to her studio by herself.[2] This simple statement has had a direct impact on my studio practice. It was the moment I realized that I could set every parameter for my studio practice as precisely and specifically as I feel is necessary at any given moment. It enabled my work to gradually transition from following rules prescribed by a particular history or tradition, and into its current system, whose rules are established through a dialogue between myself and my materials.

Flexible systems provide circumstances conducive to discovery. Consider the following example, in which a discovery was made in a system that was not only flexible, but also residing in an unexpected realm. In 1997, mathematician Daina Taimina discovered that hyperbolic space could be represented by crocheting yarn according to a simple pattern.[3] Hyperbolic space was once considered by mathematicians to be a purely theoretical space, impossible of being

---

[2] "Segment: Jessica Stockholder In 'Play.'" *art21*. October 7, 2005, http://www.art21.org/videos/segment-jessica-stockholder-in-play. Quote occurs at approximately 4:00.

[3] Maria Elena Buszek, "Crochet and the Cosmos: An Interview with Margaret Wertheim," in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 277.

represented in real space. Through crochet, Taimina was able to develop accurate models of this elusive space, creating a wonderfully tangible tool for teaching highly abstract concepts to college math students. After the development of this method, it was discovered that hyperbolic space was being embodied all along in a multitude of sea life, such as sea slugs, coral reefs, and sea sponges.[4]

Not only was a flexible, open mind required to detect this finding, but the actual physical form of the model was literally flexible. Yarn and crocheted material are of course soft and flexible. The pattern, or code is also flexible, allowing for infinite diversity of form to result from a very simple set of rules. In this way, one does not have to be a highly skilled knitter or crocheter to carry out the pattern and create an accurate model of hyperbolic space. Through flexible, inexpensive materials, and a beautifully simple system of organization, a much greater variety of people are able to create a physical model of space that has relationships to cosmological structures.

While I admire the educational endeavors that have been inspired by Taimina's discovery,[5] I am much more intrigued by the circumstances that allowed for this discovery to occur. These circumstances share many features with the ones I try to maintain in my studio, the most important ones being flexibility in form, material, and process. Such circumstances help me to understand the ways in which disparate entities (such as crochet and the universe) can share a close relationship. I believe that these relationships between seemingly different categories of thought are ubiquitous rather than rare, able to be seen when we tilt our points of view to a

[4] Buszek, "Crochet and the Cosmos," 279.

[5] Buszek, "Crochet and the Cosmos." See also http://crochetcoralreef.org/. Taimina's discovery inspired the formation of the Crochet Coral Reef project, an endeavor created and directed by science writer and cultural historian Margaret Wertheimer and her sister, cultural studies professor Christine Wertheimer.

slightly different angle, and temporarily question our previously held notions and beliefs surrounding an idea or material's value.

material foundations

The foundation of my art practice resides in the choices of my materials. I primarily choose my materials for their level of malleability, and their incitement of visual pleasure through color, texture, and tactility. I also find that my investigations deliver far more poignant results when they are conducted through the use of playful media that do not initially carry an overwhelming weight of preciousness. They are often inexpensive, throwaway, or ephemeral, and unconsidered as adequate materials for creating something of value. Just a few examples include pipe cleaners, which are given to children for playing, balsa wood and craft grade plywood, which are used to create models of a grander vision, and torn paper and foam, which are usually seen as ruined or as scrap material. By choosing to work with recognizable, culturally quotidian materials, I am increasing the potential for a material to transform back and forth between the mundane and the valuable.

My palette of materials inevitably transforms over time as it responds to the results of studio experiments, thought processes, and new ideas. I learn about my own ideas by observing and analyzing the qualities of my material choices. While they are often initially chosen because they incite a gut feeling of visual pleasure, I later realize that they point to concepts that are still forming in my mind. The phenomenal encounter with material—in the way it catches my eye, and feels in my hand, or transforms as I work with it—is a key to transitioning ideas out of my subconscious and into my conscious awareness.

In this way, each sensorial quality of my materials points to a network of interconnected concepts. I use fluorescent colors often as a symbol for life and energy in my work. Eventually I learned that the visual brightness is caused by an actual excitement of electrons when the substance encounters rays of UV light.[6] This excitement is reflected back to the eye as light. Fluorescent colors are not lightfast, and decay rapidly, especially when exposed to the light that excites such activity within them. Within fluorescent colors, cycles of life and energy are quite literally manifested. I initially chose these colors intuitively, and later discovered that their physical and chemical properties correlated with this intuition.

My process often consists of cycles of instinctive decision-making, followed by analysis of my decisions, which in turn affects future visceral responses to materials. Warm fluorescent colors, and their relationships with pastel lavenders and light blues are now intrinsically linked to the cycles of increasing and decreasing light in the Alaskan landscape, as well as to the inevitable transition from life into death. Now that I have recognized these connections, they will undoubtedly influence future decisions ranging from the selection of new materials, to the arrangement of color relationships.

The dialogue between the intuitive and the analytical is a life-source of my practice. In order to make my work I need to provide room for both in equal measure. Wooden dowels are an example of a material that entered my studio via an analytical thought process. My questions at the time revolved around basic, fundamental building structure. I was interested in the simplest ways to raise a thing off of the ground, to act in contrast to gravity with the purpose of standing,

[6] Amy McKinnon, "Fluorescent Colors: Bottling a Shooting Star," *Just Paint*, February 1, 2014, http://www.justpaint.org/fluorescent-colors-bottling-a-shooting-star/.

supporting other things, and providing shelter. The answer to these questions with which I am currently fascinated are tripods composed of dowels.

This simple material now forms the foundation of much of my work—the tripods are often the primary structural component. The stilts entered my practice to serve a function, but they remain in my practice for many reasons beyond their function. I use them to create worlds. I initially approached them from a practical point of view—they were an elegant, accessible solution to the challenge of creating a flexible support. Since their introduction to my practice they have provided a wealth of opportunity for intuitive thinking as well. When I observe a mass of them, they transform rapidly, from dowel rods, to furniture legs, to architecture, to underworld, to gravity, and back to wooden dowels. I conceptualize these cycles of transformations as a type of mental flickering, which coincides with the visual flickering that occurs because of the optical qualities of the repeated material. The two together cause a vibration that is both sensorial and intellectual. This vibration can only occur when the intuitive and the analytical are in constant dialogue with one another.

I strive to embody this mental and visual flickering as much as possible in my work. A group of fluorescent yellow pipe cleaners, for example, will transform for a viewer who allows it to do so. They might transform into plant matter, into electricity, into junk, and then back into pipe cleaners. They are both alive and dead, perpetually oscillating between the two states,

demonstrating a lack of clear distinction between categories we normally consider to be fixed. If a viewer could come away from my work with only one insight, I would most like it to be an awareness of the fluid and changeable nature of everything, particularly the things we most often perceive as permanently fixed.

Cosmos **(component of *drift*)**, birch dowels, pipe cleaners, parasol picks

intimacy and empathy: catalysts for transformation

Feelings of meaningfulness and significance are far from fixed. They are subject to great changes in magnitude and quantity. In one moment, I may be filled with an overwhelming angst—a weighty apprehension of the tenuous quality of existence. In a matter of minutes, the feeling shifts, and is replaced by a sense of calm, fulfillment, or happiness. What is the catalyst for this transformation? What enables this change of perspective? In my case, I have noticed that a transformation is often effected by an emotional interaction with another person. If the

exchange contains high levels of intimacy and empathy, it may result in a more profound transformation. The ability to change perspective can be at least partially attributed to the experience of exchanging intimacy and empathy with humans and non-humans. This is a crucial step in the process of making meaning and significant discovery.

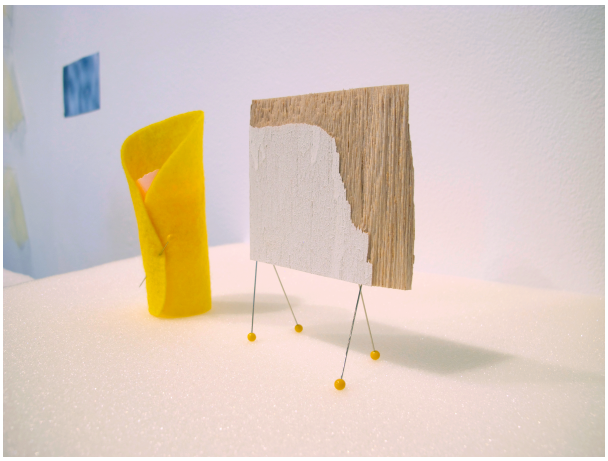
Some time ago, I began to notice my emotional relationships with my art materials, similar to how one might be attached to a piece of nostalgia, an old photograph, or a valued possession. I felt less and less interested in what the material was representing, and more compelled by the indescribable feelings of satisfaction and pleasure that occurred through engaging with the material, and observing the results. Mixing oil paint to the right viscosity so that it would transfer to the canvas in a certain way, leaving a brush stroke edged by a glossy ridge. Quickly coloring paper with a black marker, so that the slightly curved horizontal lines transformed into transparent beams of grey space. Cutting fluorescent strings and yarns into minuscule pieces, so they could project as much light as possible, transforming from object into space. I would act out these simple processes and then sit quietly and gaze at the result. I still do this.

I explore fundamental actions in my studio: breaking, cutting, hatching, binding, etc. My artwork is built upon the discoveries of pairings of action + material, such as cutting + copper wire, or binding + wooden dowels and cable ties. I have an emotional response to the results of these pairings, one that is full of intimacy and empathy, and capable of profoundly changing my perspective and state of mind. It is through my relationships with fundamental actions and materials that I have constructed my flexible system of meaning making. In this system, simple, trivial moments accumulate and transform into essential components of a greater whole. I am

perpetually interested in exploring this process of accumulation and transformation, as I believe it is a metaphor for the nature of physical and mental life.

the methodology of suspending disbelief

The playfulness and recognizable nature of the materials I choose helps to lure someone into a mindset conducive to further discovery. My work encourages a suspension of disbelief. Viewers can allow themselves to indulge in the contemplation of a pipe cleaner holding a parasol pick, or momentarily imagine that a scrap of foam is water vapor, or ice. I encourage the attribution of liveliness to inanimate matter when experiencing my work. Anthropomorphizing occurs easily—after all, many of the materials have been given sewing pin "legs." This attribution occurs more readily when a viewer has a certain level of flexibility in what they believe to be true and false, or fact and fiction. A viewer must be willing to play along in order to discover deeper meaning within the work.



As part of an installation for a graduate school critique, I cleared every object from a chalkboard railing, and then placed a broken piece of chalk toward the end of the railing, which was located in a quiet corner of the large space. This piece of chalk became a talking point during the critique, despite its smallness and seeming insignificance in comparison to the multitude of other things that were filling the room. Other people noticed that this object had been given attention and importance from me. As they continued to discuss this piece of chalk,

they developed their own relationship with this previously innocuous piece of clutter. It was as though my isolating the chalk caused it to project its need and desire for interactions with other people in order to become meaningful. I had an effect on the chalk, but the chalk also had an effect on other people.

Engaging playfully and meaningfully with seemingly inanimate material is a tactic employed by theorists in a number of fields where researchers are considering the merits of adjusting our perspective of non-human matter. In introducing her book, *Vibrant Matter*, political theorist Jane Bennett explains the importance of considering the agency of "nonhuman forces operating outside and inside the human body."[7] She contends that this acute change of outlook can facilitate a deeper understanding of the inner workings of human political and economic structures.[8] Without this change of perspective, we may be blinding ourselves to powerful actants[9] within these systems, which subsequently renders us incapable of innovating change and growth within these fields.

It is no small task to convince oneself, even temporarily, of the agency of the non-human. Bennett recommends that one "emphasize, even overemphasize, the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces (operating in nature, in the human body, and in human artifacts) in an attempt to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought. We need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism…to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world."[10] One way to

---

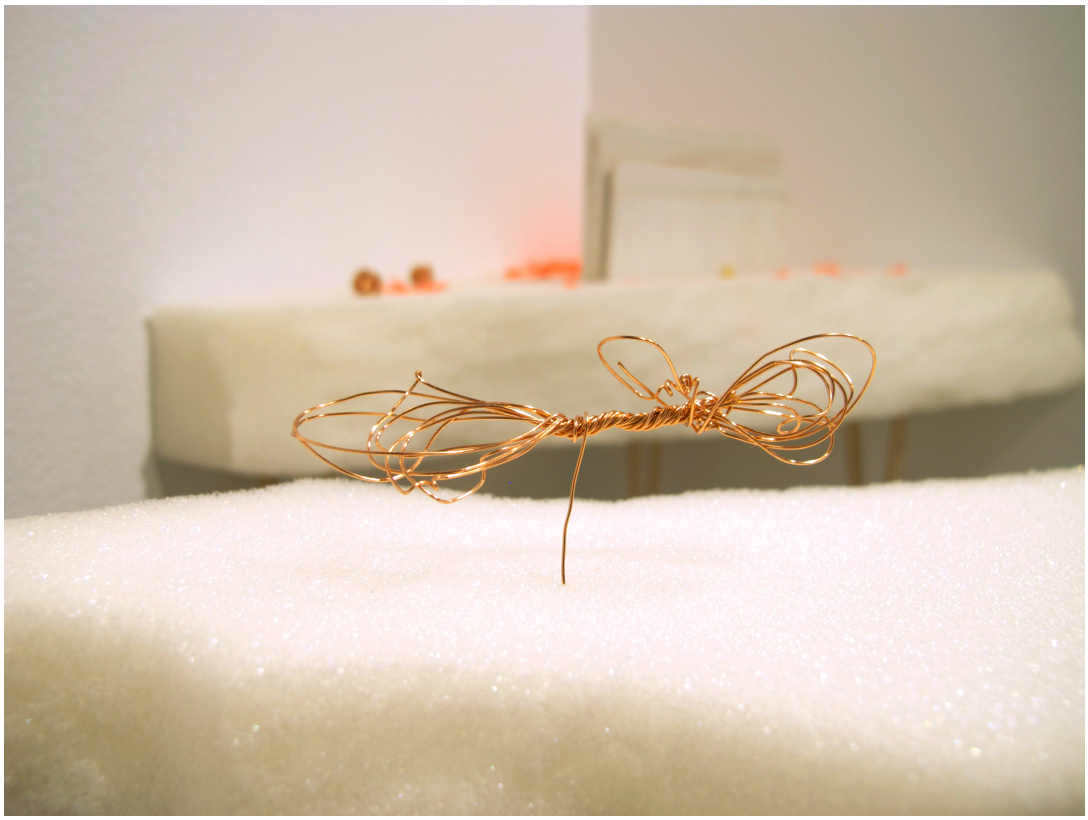
[7] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), xiv.

[8] Ibid., x.

[9] Ibid., 9. A term coined by Bruno Latour and taken up by Bennett to describe the active force of objects and things. Latour's definition: "something that acts or to which activity is granted by others. It implies no special motivation of human individual actors, nor of humans in general."

[10] Ibid., xvi.

accomplish this is to encourage a suspension of disbelief, or as Bennett eloquently phrases it, embrace a "methodological naiveté."[11] Her description of embracing this naive methodology aligns beautifully with the experiences I encounter when working with my chosen art materials: "Vital materialists will…try to linger in those moments during which they find themselves fascinated by objects, taking them as clues to the material vitality that they share with them."[12] Profound discoveries often reside slightly beyond the cusp of the practical, dipping their toes into irrational waters. A certain level of what is considered to be appropriate must be abandoned in order to discover something truly new.



[11] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 17.

[12] Ibid.

ephemeral accumulations

The ephemeral qualities of the works are not hidden or disguised. Much like the rest of the physical world, the works are evidently in states of movement and transition. The works that I make are glimpses into frozen moments of time and space, futile attempts to catch sight of the passage of time. Viewers of the artwork can imagine where the works came from, where they are going, and question the object's current state of existence. Ultimately, the connection between oneself and the inanimate object is made, and we can transition out of analyzing the artwork, and into examining our own reality. The viewer may even go as far to empathize with the artwork. They can potentially see that the work, like them, is not a permanent, singular object. It is exactly the opposite—an impermanent accumulation.

I accumulate my materials, manipulate them in some way, repeat those actions, and look for the patterns and symbols that inevitably emerge. A thread meticulously wrapped around a toothpick at some point transforms into sky, and pieces of paper dipped in plastic transform into icebergs. A multitude of various cylindrical structures often become communities of figures, and globs of confetti and pins become walking clouds. Torn pieces of foam become shifting plates of land, and masses of stilts become a walking underworld, holding up the sky.

These identities are not fixed. They shift around in the fuzzy edges between the categories of person, place, and thing. As the stilts gather in a space, they take on traits of all three categories. They stand on their spindly legs, and carry the weight of other figures and places. They are functional, like a tool, but as a whole they also form a place or a site. This site is a macrocosm that contains, supports, and protects multiple microcosms. It is a place that harbors change and transformation.

My artwork has evolved into precarious beings, much like we are. Human beings exist in an in between state. We are a part of our environment, but not quite the same, and so we work hard to understand our state of existence. My work is similar. It exists both as a part of and in opposition to its environment. It relates to the people and things external to it, but it is also guarded against that which may alter its sense of self. My artwork can potentially become a mirror, or place for reciprocal projections. The entities and landscapes project onto me, and I project onto the work. This process is symbolic of the cycles we as humans go through with one another as we develop relationships of closeness and intimacy. We require closeness and intimacy, but these bonds can only be formed with great care. The space and the audience around the work reinforce and remind of certain needs and desires—needing support while desiring independence, needing intimacy while desiring isolation, needing to be vulnerable while desiring to be secure.

At the heart of this investigation is a deep interest in that which constitutes and defines life and living. Through my work, I strive to exemplify the temporal nature of living and being. In one moment we are something, in the next we are something else entirely. We appear to be composed of the same material from one moment to the next, but we perceive ourselves differently, and are perceived by others differently as we move through junctures in space and time. Stepping back, I see that my artworks continuously undergo a series of births, deaths, and reincarnations, as they are repeatedly constructed, assembled, collapsed, and reassembled.

conclusion

In making my work, I have come to understand the immense role individual choice plays in activating moments of transformation. Often (though not always), a person has the capacity to

change their perception of the significance of an object, another person, a concept, or a belief. I have learned that great meaning in my life is not necessarily a given, but is also established through my own efforts—an active willingness to shift my point of view in order to perceive magnitudes of importance within that which was previously thought to be insignificant, erroneous, or non-existent. A grain of sand, for many intents and purposes is useless and meaningless. From a few select angles, however, it can become the most important thing in the world.

This relativistic approach is not meant to inspire nihilism or skepticism, but rather the opposite. A playful suspension of disbelief combined with a certain flexibility of mind can lead to profound discoveries of meaningful content in the most improbable of places. Some discoveries are obvious in their level of importance and gravitas. They may have immediate impact on larger communities, or act as a catalyst for a subsequent outpouring of new knowledge. Other discoveries are interior ones that reside deep within the psyche. Barely tangible, they glimmer like moonlight on water in the peripheral vision of the subconscious mind. Like the phenomenon of life on earth, they are microscopic and ephemeral, but they are far from meaningless.

Bibliography

"drift definition," *Google*, Accessed May 3, 2016. https://www.google.com/?gws_rd=ssl#q=drift+definition.

"Segment: Jessica Stockholder In 'Play.'" *art21*. October 7, 2005. http://www.art21.org/videos/segment-jessica-stockholder-in-play.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Buszek, Maria Elena. "Crochet and the Cosmos: An Interview with Margaret Wertheim." In *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, edited by Maria Elena Buszek, 276-290. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

McKinnon, Amy. "Fluorescent Colors: Bottling a Shooting Star." *Just Paint*. February 1, 2014. http://www.justpaint.org/fluorescent-colors-bottling-a-shooting-star/.